

MURRAY DOUGLAS, MURRAY CREEK, AND DOUGLAS CREEK CONSERVATION EASEMENTS Draft Resource Management Plan

INTRODUCTION

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase three discrete conservation easements on approximately 10,760 acres approximately 4 miles north of Drummond, in Powell County, MT (Figure 1). Along with the attached Environmental Assessment, this draft management plan discloses FWP's management intent for public review and comment, and for documenting existing information for future reference. This document conveys interim management policies and strategies for the properties while the long term and supplemental management plans are developed.

Goals:

- Permanently protect important native wildlife habitat;
- Provide perpetual fall public hunting access to the Land;
- Contribute to the overall function, integrity, and management of adjacent private, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), and Bureau of Land Management lands;
- Maintain the Land as working forest and range.

Detailed vegetative inventories and forest management plans have been completed for the proposed conservation easement lands (Northwest Management, Inc., 2011-12; available upon request at the FWP Region 2 Headquarters). A baseline inventory of broader vegetative condition, roads, utilities, improvements, etc. was completed in 2012.

ACQUISITION DATE

FWP plans to acquire the Conservation Easements from The Nature Conservancy (TNC), The Blackfoot River Ranch, Inc., and the Manley Family Limited Partnership during the summer of 2013, pending public review and approval.

CHAIN OF OWNERSHIP

The Murray Douglas Conservation Easement property was purchased from Plum Creek Timber Company by The Nature Conservancy in 2004 as part of a larger 89,000-acre conservation initiative (The Blackfoot Community Project). The Land has been owned and managed by TNC since that time. Following FWP's purchase of the conservation easement, portions of the Land would be sold to private (likely adjacent) landowners. Subsequent owners would be subject to the terms of the Conservation Easement and Resource Management Plans.

The Murray Creek Conservation Easement land is owned by the Blackfoot River Ranch Inc. (Helmville). The Douglas Creek Conservation Easement land is owned by the Manley Family Limited Partnership (Drummond). Both ranches have managed these lands for many years.

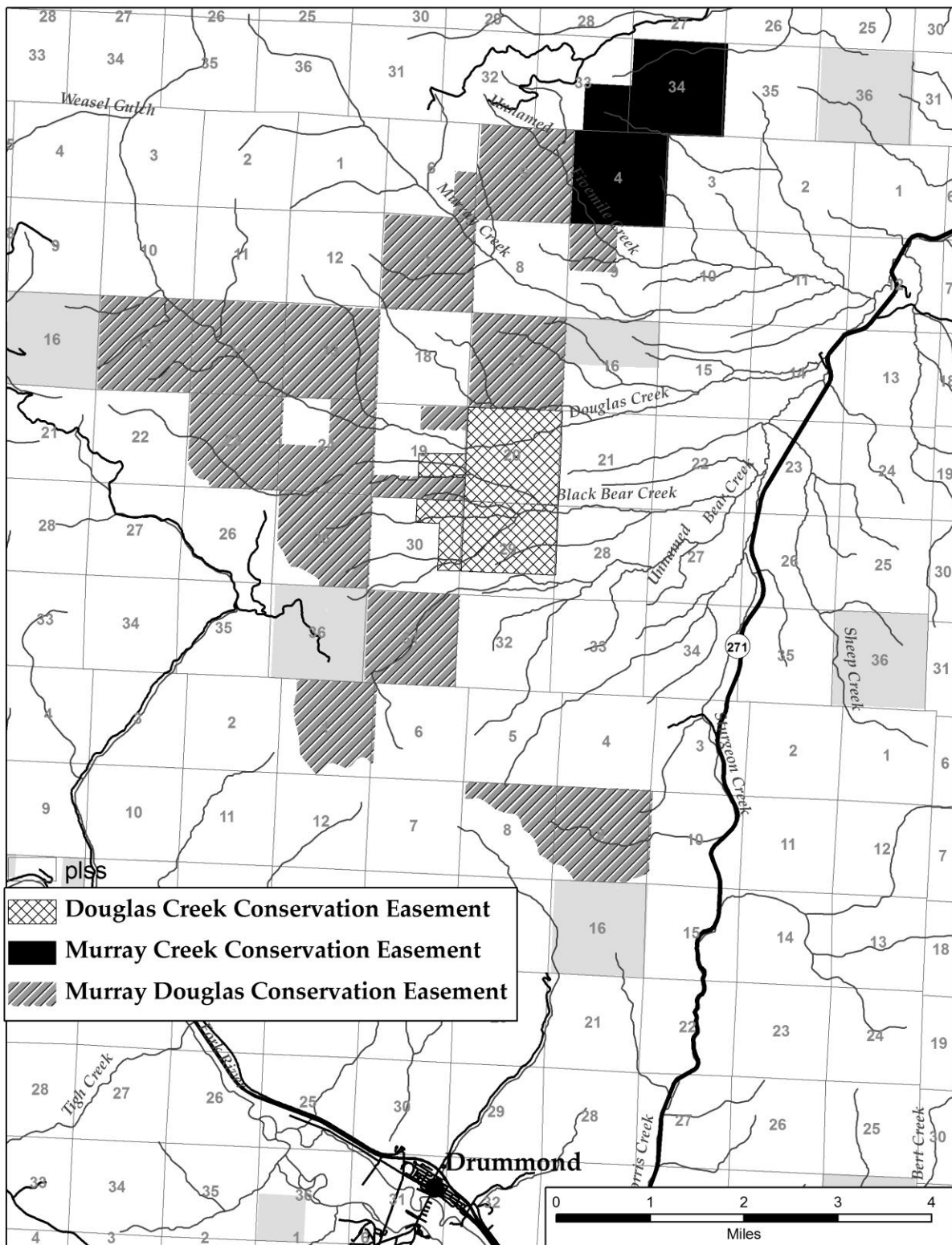


Figure 1. Location of the Project Area in Powell County. Landowners of parcels proposed for conservation easements (CEs): Douglas Creek CE = Manley Family Limited Partnership; Murray Creek CE = Blackfoot River Ranch, Inc.; Murray Douglas CE = The Nature Conservancy.

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

Location:

The Land lies about 4-8 miles north of Drummond in the Blackfoot Watershed (Powell Co.) between Sturgeon Mountain and Fivemile Creek

Acreage Subject to Conservation Easement:

LEGAL DESCRIPTION OF THE MURRAY DOUGLAS CONSERVATION EASEMENT

Lands lying in Township 11 North, Range 12 West, P.M.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 8: All that portion lying within Powell County
Section 9: All that portion lying within Powell County

Lands lying in Township 11 North, Range 13 West, P.M.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 1: Government Lots 1, 2 and 3; S $\frac{1}{2}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$; and those portions of Government Lot 4; S $\frac{1}{2}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$; SW $\frac{1}{4}$; and the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ lying within Powell County.

Lands lying in Township 12 North, Range 12 West, P.M.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 5: Governments Lots 1, 2, 3 and 4; S $\frac{1}{2}$ N $\frac{1}{2}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$
Section 6: E $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$
Section 7: Governments Lots 1, 2, 3, and 4; E $\frac{1}{2}$ W $\frac{1}{2}$; E $\frac{1}{2}$
Section 9: NW $\frac{1}{4}$
Section 17: All
Section 19: N $\frac{1}{2}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$; Government Lot 4; SE $\frac{1}{4}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$
Section 31: Government Lots 1, 2, 3 and 4; E $\frac{1}{2}$ W $\frac{1}{2}$; E $\frac{1}{2}$

Lands lying in Township 12 North, Range 13 West, P.M.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 13: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, and 4; W $\frac{1}{2}$ E $\frac{1}{2}$; W $\frac{1}{2}$
Section 14: All
Section 15: All
Section 23: All that portion located within Powell County
Section 24: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, and 4; W $\frac{1}{2}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$; W $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$; SW $\frac{1}{4}$
Section 25: All that portion located within Powell County

LEGAL DESCRIPTION OF THE MURRAY CREEK CONSERVATION EASEMENT

Lands lying in Township 12 North, Range 12 West, M.P.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 4: Government Lots 1, 2, 3 and 4, S $\frac{1}{2}$ N $\frac{1}{2}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$ (All)

Lands lying in Township 13 North, Range 12 West, M.P.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 33: SE $\frac{1}{4}$
Section 34: All

LEGAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DOUGLAS CREEK CONSERVATION EASEMENT

Lands Lying in Township 12 North, Range 12 West, P.M.M., Powell County, Montana:

Section 19: N $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$
Section 20: All

Section 29: N ½; N ½ S ½
Section 30: NE ¼ SE ¼; N ½ NE ¼; SE ¼ NE ¼

LANDFORMS AND DRAINAGE

The subject land lies on the southeastern flank of the Garnet Mountains in the Blackfoot Watershed. Elevations range from 4,000 – 6,500 feet; slope and aspect varies.

The Murray Creek Conservation Easement parcels consist of approximately 1,450 acres within Murray and Fivemile Creeks. The property is made up of variously stocked native forest rangeland, sagebrush grasslands, and riparian corridors.

The Douglas Creek Conservation Easement parcels consist of approximately 1,370 acres currently within the Douglas Creek and Black Bear Creek drainages. These parcels are a mix of open Douglas-fir and pine forest, native rangeland, hay meadows, and riparian corridors.

The Murray Douglas Conservation Easement parcels encompass approximately 7,940 acres in several distinct parcels ranging from Fivemile Creek in the north to Sturgeon Mountain in the south. These lands former industrial forest land are primarily sparsely stocked regenerating Douglas-fir and pine forests with native grass understories intermixed with aspen stands and riparian vegetation near streams.

VEGETATION

The subject lands are almost completely forested. The most abundant conifer tree species on the properties is Douglas-fir. Ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine are common while western larch and Englemann spruce occur more rarely. Aspen is the primary deciduous tree species present. Sites are generally dry and timber productivity and regeneration is moderate.

The forest understory vegetation includes common snowberry, pinegrass, elk sedge, heartleaf arnica, white spirea, kinnikinnick, Oregon grape, serviceberry, and twinflower. Common forest habitat types are Douglas-fir/snowberry, Douglas-fir/twinflower, and Douglas-fir/ pine grass.

Most forest stands have been previously managed for commercial timber production. Timber harvest has significantly decreased the abundance of large diameter ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Forest stands generally have overstories of Douglas-fir with understories of sapling, seedling and pole-sized Douglas-fir on moist aspects and grass on drier aspects. Ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine regeneration is present but not abundant in most areas.

Bluebunch wheatgrass, rough fescue, arrowleaf balsamroot and Idaho fescue are present on dry aspects and in forest openings. Fire suppression over the last 80 years has likely reduced the overall grassland acreage. Riparian corridors are present along perennial streams.

No Montana State listed Plant Species of Concern are known to occur on the properties.

Several species of noxious weeds occur throughout the property at various levels of infestation. Weeds are most prevalent on roadsides and on drier aspects with grassy understories and sparse forest canopy cover. The most prevalent weed species include cheatgrass, spotted knapweed, hound's tongue, and thistles.

A detailed inventory of the Land's vegetation types, stand locations and descriptions, current vegetative condition, weed management needs, forest insect and disease, and management prescriptions has been completed (Northwest Management, Inc., 2011-12) and is on file with the landowner and at the FWP Region 2 Headquarters.

WILDLIFE HABITAT

The Land provides important summer and fall/transitional range for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. Elk, mule deer, and moose may use portions of the properties during winter at times and during years when snowpack is less limiting.

A portion of the East Garnet elk herd annually migrates out of the Helmville Valley to winter on the open faces between Bearmouth and Drummond. The subject lands lie within this migratory corridor.

The Land provides important habitat for other big game species including moose, black bear, wolf, and mountain lion. Bobcat, pine marten, mountain grouse, raptors, and dozens of passerine bird species are also common.

The Land does not include high quality Canada lynx habitat nor would production of lynx habitat be a reasonable management objective. That said, one of the southernmost, naturally occurring populations of Canada lynx in the American west occurs adjacent to project lands (in the higher elevation areas of the Garnet mountains) and the Land contributes to the function of a putative north/south movement corridor.

Grizzly bear presence on and around the subject property has increased in recent years as the southern extent of the bear's range continues to expand. Today, grizzly sightings on or near the subject land are common.

The properties do not, and would not, support regionally important native fish habitat.

IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT

Forest roads are the primary improvement on the properties. Their condition varies widely from relatively poor to high-standard. A detailed spatial and qualitative inventory of roads on the property occurred during the development of the Baseline inventory in 2012. Road maps and photo points are also included in the Forest Stewardship Plans.

Some cattle fencing is present; its condition varies. Existing fence would be mapped and considered as supplemental Grazing Management Plans are developed.

MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Management of the Land would be largely at the discretion of the landowner except that management actions must comply with the agreed terms of the Conservation Easements. The Conservation Easements restrict or guide several significant land management activities:

Subdivision and Development

The landowner s may not construct permanent structures on the Land without prior approval from FWP. The land may not be subdivided, except as specifically provided for in the easements. The sellers and FWP have anticipated several sales of TNC lands to neighboring landowners; these and several additional splits have been specifically allowed for in the Easements. Transfers of land to a public agency would not count as a subdivision for the purposes of the Conservation Easement. Utility and energy

generation improvements, habitat improvement activities, and road building may occur with the Prior Approval of FWP.

Forest Management

The landowner retains the right, and is in fact encouraged, to actively manage forested habitat on the property consistent with the Conservation Easements' stated conservation values and the Forest Stewardship Plans. Any management activity that produces material sold or otherwise transferred off the property requires prior FWP notice and approval to ensure compliance with the easement and Forest Stewardship Plans. The landowners would prepare a Forest Management Plan describing the anticipated activity for FWP review and approval.

The Forest Stewardship Plans provides detailed descriptions of current forest types, stand condition, and management recommendations. We anticipate updating the Forest Stewardship Plan periodically and in collaboration with the landowner to account for forest succession and other significant changes to existing forest stand condition.

Grazing Management

The landowners may graze livestock on the properties with FWP's Prior Approval and following a FWP-approved Grazing Management Plan. If and when the landowners wish to graze livestock on the properties, a Plan would be developed cooperatively with FWP and appended to the Resource Management Plan.

Public Recreational Access

The Conservation Easements require that the landowners provide recreational hunting access during the fall hunting season. The conservation easement does *not* require the landowner to grant access by any but non-motorized, non-mechanical means. The landowners must allow public hunters to enter the land may restrict access to open public roads, designated parking areas, or adjacent public land. The landowner may choose to allow individuals motorized access to the property and may deny access to anyone who is not conducting, or has not in the past conducted, herself or himself in a prudent, responsible, and safe manner.

FWP would work with landowners to develop a Recreation Access Plan to help manage public use of the property. This Plan would direct the designation of parking areas, signage, developing and maintaining road closure structures, etc. FWP would contribute material and manpower toward the development and implementation of these Recreation Access Plans.

Other Restricted Activities

The landowners may not, without Prior Approval or as otherwise provided for in the Conservation Easements, significantly manipulate native vegetation; transfer, sell, or lease water rights; degrade wetland or riparian areas; conduct exploratory or extractive surface mining; operate a feed lot; install utilities; construct permanent structures; introduce non-native plants; operate an alternative livestock ranch, fur farm, shooting preserve, zoo, or other facility that holds or propagates native or non-native animals; rent or lease the land for recreational purpose (including outfitting) or charge trespass fees; use the land for commercial or industrial use apart from forest management and livestock grazing.

Noxious Weed Management

The Forest Stewardship Plan provides basic information on the distribution and treatment of weeds on the property. The individual landowners are responsible for control of noxious weeds on their land.